

crystal clear

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by [Drhair76](#)

Summary

"No practice?" Tommy repeats, shifting the phone so he makes sure that he can hear properly. He flinches at his own words— don't repeat. "Sir," he scrambles to say, "I – is everything alright?"

"Everything is just fine, Tommy," Eret responds. He pauses, tsks slightly. "And remember, I'm just Eret."

Tommy opens his mouth, then goes, "coach." It's the best he can do. It's not enough.

or, Tommy and Eret figure some things out together.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Wilbur knows within the first five minutes of meeting Eret that he'll be the perfect coach for Tommy.

It's a lot of things; and maybe Wilbur is just projecting, maybe Wilbur knows what he needed back when he was drifting, but- it takes all of three minutes for Eret to cover Tommy's hands with his own, and then it takes the other two for him to corral Tommy off the ice.

It's also the conversation after where Eret speaks gently and eases Tommy's concerns like he's been doing it his whole life. That's it. That's what Tommy needs. Gentle and methodical and easy. It's what Tommy deserves after all this time.

As the coach walks off towards the office, Phil turns to him. "Well?"

Wilbur watches the way Tommy carefully steps off the ice, the way he casts a confused but not afraid glance to where Eret just left, the way he comes over to the bench to unlace his skates.

"Yeah," Wilbur says, relief building up inside him. Tommy's found his Phil. Thank God.

"Yeah, I think this will go well."

"There's no practice today," Eret says, and Tommy's heart tumbles down, down, down, out of his chest.

Things have been relatively good. Post-Olympics, post-trial, post- *everything*, Tommy has been finding life a million times more easier than it was before. First off, he sleeps full nights. He doesn't think he's been this well rested in *years*, and it has everything to do with the way he gets to hunker down at the sides of gentle, warm hockey players, and easy, careful snowboarders, and even, sometimes, next to skaters just like him. He also has *so many people* now. He's got *friends* – real ones, and they make him laugh over meals and drag him to hang out even when he doesn't feel well.

And, most importantly, his coach is gone.

Tommy never thought it would happen. He never thought he'd be free. But he is, and even if there's another to replace him, Tommy is grateful.

And besides, Eret is nothing like his old coach.

It's weird to get used to. It's like trying a brand new jump and being unsure of where the ground is as you're on your way down. Your stomach swoops and braces for pain, but you catch yourself and it never comes. Tommy, with Eret, is always bracing for pain that never seems to come.

But this is ... different.

"No practice?" Tommy repeats, shifting the phone so he makes sure that he can hear properly. He flinches at his own words– *don't repeat*. "Sir," he scrambles to say, "I – is everything

alright?"

"Everything is just fine, Tommy," Eret responds. He pauses, tsks slightly. "And remember, I'm just Eret."

Tommy opens his mouth, then goes, "coach." It's the best he can do. It's not enough.

Eret hums like that's acceptable enough. Tommy wants to shrink into himself. "But yes, no practice today – rest up, okay? We'll get back on the ice soon." And then he says his goodbyes, leaving Tommy sitting there with a phone to his ear and a pit opening in his stomach.

No practice? None? Tommy, distantly, sets the phone down. None at all? What is he meant to do in place of skating?

Then a thought hits him –

"Snowflake," his coach hums, tone unreadable, "what do you think about not having practice tomorrow?"

Tommy, too focused on keeping quiet in the corner of the hotel room, blinks. He's startled at being addressed – he figured they'd go the night in this silence. The one that Tommy's learned not to break.

"Not having practice?" Tommy asks, and his coach makes a disapproving noise.

"Don't repeat my words back at me – give me an answer."

Tommy flushes, ashamed. "I – I think that could be nice? We could do something together maybe." And he's hopeful. He's hesitant. But apparently his coach doesn't want that, because he turns and fixes Tommy with such a strong glare that Tommy wishes he never broke the silence.

"I see," he sniffs. "So, if the opportunity were presented to you, you would skip working in order to ...what? Do nothing?"

"I just thought–"

"If you don't want to put in equal effort for this dream, then maybe you shouldn't have it."

Tommy's mouth snaps shut.

– what if this is a test?

The thought makes Tommy's limbs tight with anxious energy. It makes his breath harder to find in his lungs. *What if Eret is testing his resilience?* Tommy is now an Olympic gold athlete – he's made it. This was his dream since he was small, what he's worked towards his whole life. But even he knows that the work doesn't stop here. His coach would put him in for the next qualifiers the day after the closing ceremonies. He would say *maybe you got the*

gold, but now you have to prove that you've actually earned it. Practice tomorrow, be there early. It'll be a hard one.

Tommy doesn't deserve rest. He hasn't earned it. Eret must know that.

He takes a deep breath and stands, gathering clothes to skate in.

He isn't bothered by being out on the ice alone.

Tommy is well used to having practices without his coach. He's meant to get to the rink thirty minutes before they ever start so he doesn't waste anyone's time, so even if the heat isn't on yet and Tommy has to do his warm ups shivering, or if it was raining and he doesn't have enough time to properly dry his hair, he should be on the ice. If he isn't — well.

Tommy is just used to it being him and only him. And honestly, he prefers it. It can be awful when he's working and working because he never really knows when his coach would tell him to stop, but other than that, everything is better. Tommy feels looser without the scrutinizing eyes tracking his every move, and if he ever needs to, he can take a moment to catch his breath without being punished for it.

It's just him and the ice and the millions of things that he's subpar at.

So why, when Tommy skates out onto the dark rink that morning, does he feel sick?

He shakes out his limbs, skates back and forth, does a couple of laps. He's all stretched out and he's eaten breakfast and it's even later than he's used to waking up, so he slept okay — why does he feel so horrible?

When something feels wrong, Phil said once, and I can't place what it is, I close my eyes and stay still. I check myself, part by part, feeling by feeling, until I know exactly where everything is going wrong.

Tommy's eyes jump to the rink clock nervously. If this really is a test, then he's good for another five minutes before Eret comes in and sees whether or not he's practicing. He stills, then closes his eyes, taking a deep breath.

His feet aren't aching — back when he first started, he'd have ankle bruises all day from overuse. Eventually they'd numbed, and then he just got used to them, but now he knows how to skate clean. His legs aren't shaking — after practice he would have trembling legs that made every step feel like rolling a dice. He's graceful, so he knows now how to walk on legs that are threatening to give out. His head doesn't hurt — he used to get migraines from the rink lights glaring against the ice. But now, he's sure his eyes have simply adjusted, and if his head does start to hurt, he knows how to disappear into his body so he can't feel it.

Nothing *hurts*, though. He's perfectly *fine*. So why can't he just skate?

Because, a voice comes, that sounds suspiciously like Eret's, *there is no practice today.*

Tommy opens his eyes, turning on the ice – he refuses to believe it. Sure, maybe Eret *says* that he would never lie to Tommy. Maybe Eret *says* that he would never speak in codes. Maybe Eret *says* that Tommy can always simply ask him what he means and have it explained as many times until Tommy understands. But– there's just no way. There's no way it all isn't a trick.

Even if there isn't any practice today, Tommy thinks, curving around the rink once more, then I shouldn't stop working. This is what I'm made for – nothing else.

"What did you do on Monday?" Eret asks, bending over to touch his toes as a stretch before they get on the ice. "Did you sleep? Call your friends? Visit your family?"

Tommy blinks. "Um." He looks over at the ice – at the new scratches he laid spinning and spinning and spinning. By the end he wanted to throw up, and that's how he knew he was doing it right. "I – I rested."

A grin blooms over Eret's face. "That's brilliant, Tommy. Really. I hope it was nice, because if you don't mind, we're gonna do some jumps today, alright? Does that sound good to you?"

Tommy nods once. *Finally*, he thinks, *something he's used to*.

Eret somehow makes practicing jumps *different*.

"Okay," he'll go, shifting back and forth, "let's try just a double axel for right now, how does that sound?"

And Tommy prepares to take off, ready to follow instructions, but Eret moves *first*, not letting him. *He* does the jump and then *he* sticks the landing. And then he turns to Tommy and *asks* if Tommy feels up to doing that.

Tommy doesn't know how to answer other than nodding mutely, and he certainly doesn't know how to respond to the praise that he's met with when he falls out of the jump.

My back wasn't straight enough, I could've gone higher, it was a strangled movement, he's thinking, but Eret is beaming and clapping like Tommy won gold.

All of it is...confusing. Tommy keeps tensing and relaxing and tensing again simply because he never knows what to expect.

Everything that he's known isn't there anymore, and Tommy's not sure if that's a good thing.

"How would you like to prepare a routine for the Post-Olympics ice art gala?"

Tommy...doesn't know what to do with this. He's never been *asked* whether he wants to do an event before. His coach would always just slap a schedule down in front of him – *here*. *These are the days that we'll be away. Tell your parents and pack your bags*. Tommy wasn't

supposed to ask questions – not about school or about his friends (the few that he was still clinging to) or about how long they were supposed to be there. He didn't ask where they were going or even get excited about going there. He just–

What time should I be ready to leave?

And the actual skates? Forget about it. He doesn't think he's ever told his coach what his favorite move is – he doesn't think he's ever been *asked*. There's no way he was going to touch any of the choreography or music.

I know what's best for you, snowflake – never forget that. You'd be lost without me.

"If you think it's best," Tommy says after a moment. "The publicity –"

Eret frowns, disapproving. Tommy changes tracks.

"I mean – the practice. The – exposure will be good." He tries. "To see the other competition."

Eret's head tilts. Again comes that searching look, the one that says *I'm trying to figure out where your brain is at, because I'm not there with you*. "Yes," he says slowly. "It would be good for those reasons. But also just for fun."

Tommy blinks. "For what?"

"Fun, Tommy." He says. "It's an art gala. It isn't for medals or awards. It's a chance for all the national skaters to show off, basically." Eret smiles, eyes crinkling. "When I was skating, I did one and it was a blast – Sam and I made a point to count how many skaters did a quick outfit change or used weird props in their routines."

"You can do that?" Tommy asks before he can stop himself, leaning forward slightly, his voice hushed with excitement.

Eret leans forward too, matching his smile. "Yes, Tommy. Whatever you want. Gala's are the best – you can do anything, *be* anyone. There are no rules for this event. But only if you want to. Only if you want."

Tommy swallows. "Are you sure?"

"Are *you* sure?"

Tommy shrinks. He doesn't know how to make this decision for himself. For *fun*. There has to be a way that he can justify this decision – a reason why he deserves it.

Maybe, Tommy thinks, making Eret happy can be the reason.

"Yes," he says finally, and Eret smiles.

Practices increase in frequency after that.

Tommy expected it, of course – they always had more practices right before any trips or events. His coach worked Tommy up until the last minute that he could, so much so that Tommy would always pass out the second he'd get on any plane or train, no matter how uncomfortable he was with his company.

They start to have daily practices, but they never *feel* like daily practices.

Tommy goes to the rink, stretches and warms up. Eret shows up, lightly, *teasingly* chastises him for being too early, and follows him. From there, Eret asks him a couple of questions – what do you want to work on today? How do you feel? Have you decided on a song? And Tommy, more often than not, shrugs these questions off.

"I was thinking," he would start, watching Eret's expression closely, "about a classical piece."

Frustratingly, Eret would smile. "That sounds nice."

"Or," he would test, "opera."

The look didn't change. Neither did his tone. "Opera is very cool."

With his old coach, it would be very *clear* when something was preferred or disliked. Tommy would step out of the bathroom in a certain button down and his coach would be there, leaning against the wall, a disapproving frown on his face. Or Tommy would sit down somewhere – probably at his side – and he would scowl, making Tommy fold away.

Eret just...doesn't mind. He doesn't care whether Tommy chooses classical or opera or any specific time period.

"How about...pop?" He tries one day, and he keeps his eyes down so he can't see the way that Eret's eyes harden. He keeps his eyes down like it will hide him away from the venom that he knows is coming.

But it never comes.

"Pop? That sounds amazing, do you have a song in mind?"

Tommy blinks. He looks up, startled. "You wouldn't mind? You wouldn't mind if I skated to...not classical?"

Eret's smile is tinged in sadness. "Tommy, it's your routine. Why would I mind?"

So Tommy picks a song, and he's hesitant about it, and Eret knows that, because he says *you don't have to show me right now if you don't want to – just let me know what I can help you with.*

There was a block at first. Eret told him, *do whatever choreography you want*, and Tommy, overwhelmed with choice, stood there, frozen on the ice.

Eret drifted around him, waiting, patient, always patient.

"Go with your gut," he advised when Tommy, helpless, looked at him for a command. "Do what feels right to you."

How is Tommy supposed to know what feels right for him, when he's spent so long doing what someone else taught him?

"Can you –" he starts. Eret freezes in his tracks. Tommy's cheeks flush. He swallows, making his throat form the words. "Can you give me somewhere to start, sir? Please?"

Eret's eyes soften. "Of course, Tommy. If that's what you need. Why don't you start with a story?"

Tommy stares. He wants to ask *a story, sir?* Because the words are foreign to him. He's never worked in abstracts before – honestly, he expected Eret to say *quad toe loop to a triple axel* and then he could fill in the rest of the jumps from there.

"Sorry," Tommy blurts when Eret just watches him. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"You don't need to apologize," Eret laughs gently. "If you are ever confused about something, you only need to ask. I'd explain it as many times as you need. What I mean is – what is the story that you're trying to tell with this piece of work, Tommy? What's the plot? Every routine has a premise behind it that makes it special – what's yours?"

"Oh," Tommy breathes, blinking at the ice around him. A story. Not jump after jump after jump with frills stuffed in between. A reason for the skate. A purpose to be on the ice. "I've never...I've never done that before."

"That's alright." He smiles. "Let me help you."

And that's how the practices pass – just the two of them, on the ice, creating a story and building a routine from air.

After his coach's practices, Tommy always felt like his bones were tugging him down. Gravity was piling on top of him and sliding, and the second that he was allowed to fall still, he would fall *down*. It was a limb-quaking, lung-burning, sleep and never wake again type of exhaustion.

But with Eret, even the daily aspect of the practices didn't make Tommy feel that way. Every day that he stepped off the ice, sure, he was tired, but it was a rewarding ache. It was the feeling of having done something worthwhile. Eret, constantly smiling, constantly praising him, made him feel like he was getting somewhere with everything.

He can't remember the last time he stepped off the ice and felt *good* about what he'd done.

Tommy, maybe selfishly, never wants that feeling to end.

A week before the gala, Eret calls him.

"No practice today or tomorrow, Tommy," he says. "I'm canceling it."

And Tommy... Tommy doesn't understand. He doesn't get why Eret would test him like this. If it even is a test. He thought he'd proven to his coach that he was willing to work hard on anything, even if it's way out of his comfort zone.

If you are ever confused about something, you only need to ask.

Hesitantly, he decides to take the chance.

"Sir? I mean – coach? Am I – Am I disappointing you?"

The line goes silent.

Regret washes over Tommy so strong that he almost wants to abruptly hang up the phone. He shouldn't have asked. He should have just gone to the rink and worked until he passed out. He should have just spun and spun until his stomach flipped. He should have just –

"Tommy," Eret says finally, "can I ask you a question? You're not in trouble, I'm just curious."

Tommy makes a strangled noise around the panic attack caught in his throat.

"Why do you believe that I'd be disappointed in you?"

"I haven't been practicing hard enough," he whispers, embarrassed. "That's why you're canceling, right? To make me want it?"

"To make you—" Eret pauses. Again, the pervading silence. "Tommy, just one more question, and please, answer honestly, no matter how you think it might make me feel. A month ago when I canceled practice, what did you do?"

Tommy pulls at his sleeve. "...I went down to the rink."

"Why?"

"I thought you wanted me to. I thought – did you not want me to?"

"Tommy, I told you that practice was canceled."

"But it – it was a test. Wasn't it a –" Tommy's voice dies. He wants to cry. He's so tired of being confused. When he speaks next, it's barely audible. "I thought it was a test."

"A test," Eret repeats. "A trick, you mean?"

Tommy shakes his head – Eret can't see it, but he can probably tell Tommy's overwhelmed silences apart.

"Tommy, if your coach told you one thing and expected another, it wasn't a test. A test is fair. That was a trick," he explains, voice patient and gentle, much more than Tommy deserves. Tears well up in his eyes. "I will never ask you one thing and expect another. If ever I test you, it will be fair and you will know all the things that I am expecting and I will *never*

punish you for not being able to meet those expectations. Okay? Please tell me you understand."

And Tommy means to – really, he does. But when he goes to open his mouth, all that falls out are sobs. Relieved, terrible, ugly sobs.

It was a trick, he thinks, over and over, *it was a trick – I didn't fail. It wasn't fair. I didn't deserve it. And: I never have to go through that again.*

The endless spinning, the empty rink, the headache inducing movements. Watching the clock and tallying his own mistakes, marking down his own failures. Doing a jump, landing, and immediately thinking *not good enough, go again*. Five reps and ten reps and fifteen. Twenty and twenty-five and thirty.

Eret, surprisingly – or unsurprisingly – doesn't scoff at his tears. He hums sympathetically, and waits Tommy out. When Tommy's tears turn into sniffles, he speaks.

"Tommy, I'm sorry."

"You – you're what?" Tommy swipes his arm across his face. "Why?"

"I'm sorry that you went through that." He continues. "And I'm sorry that you were made to think it's your fault. But I'm especially sorry that you thought that *with me*. I should have been clearer with you."

Tommy sniffles again, then goes, "S'okay. I should have asked."

"Yes, that's true. I wouldn't have turned you down, but you didn't know that, did you? Now you do."

"Coach," Tommy says. "Eret. Did – is there really no practice today?"

"There's really no practice today, Tommy." He says, and it's just that simple. Tommy feels himself unlock. "I wanted you to have some time to relax. Take a break. Do something fun."

"Practice was fun," Tommy says before he even knows what he's doing. He blinks, realizing that he means it. Being on the ice with Eret and building their story *was* fun. "Sorry. I just don't think I know how to take a break."

Eret is quiet for a moment. When he speaks next it sounds like he's smiling. "Okay. How about this? Get dressed to go outside. Comfortable, warm clothes. Wait outside, I'll be over in twenty."

Tommy's thrown by the new volley of information. "No skates?" he asks, just to clarify.

"No skates."

Tommy frowns, but says *okay* and hangs up.

True to his word, Eret is outside in twenty minutes. Tommy had panicked for a bit trying to figure out exactly how to dress, but ultimately decided on one a t-shirt under one of the yellow sweatshirts that Wilbur and Quackity took him shopping for.

These are your clothes, Wilbur had said, a proud smile on his face, *you chose them, so you wear them. Whenever you want.*

"Tommy!" Eret greets, leaning over and opening the passenger side door. Tommy slides in and buckles his seat-belt. "You look nice – are you ready to go?"

"Thank you," Tommy mumbles, red, thrown by the casual compliment. "Where are we going?"

Eret grins. "You'll see."

The drive is beautiful, as all drives with Eret are. Tommy eases slowly as the miles stretch on, until he's got his head back and eyes closed, simply enjoying the breeze through his hair. He feels half asleep, but he isn't scared when the car stops and Eret gently calls his name.

"We're here," he says when Tommy blinks at him sleepily. He shifts and sits up, looking out of the rolled down window.

Tommy blinks again. Then rubs his eyes. And blinks again.

"Are we...are we at the zoo?"

Eret laughs. "Come on Tommy – let's go."

Dazed, Tommy fumbles for the lock and gets out of the car, following after Eret towards the front gates. He can't stop staring at everything – the kids holding their parents' hands, the strollers, the little balloons floating by. He sees frog hats and cheetah water bottles and penguin pins.

"What are we– why are we here?" He asks, half gaping at the huge sign that says *giant panda exhibit open now* and half keeping an eye on the queue in front of them to get tickets.

"For fun," Eret says, eyes gleaming. "This is our break from practice. And besides, I want to see the polar bears."

Tommy is dumbfounded, and he remains that way from the time they crawl up to the front of the line to the time that they make their way to their first map-stand and Eret is turning to him.

"Where do you want to go first?" He asks.

Tommy looks at the map, overwhelmed. There are lemurs and lizards and lions – anteaters, alligators, armadillos. All sorts of animals to see and Tommy is still not over the fact that he's even *here*.

"Would you like somewhere to start?" Eret asks kindly, and Tommy nods. "Okay, well, if we follow the path through the Asian animals, it will loop us around to the left. Or we can do the African savanna and loop around to the right. Either way, we'll make a big circle and see everything. Which one do you want to see first? The pandas or the elephants?"

And oh. Tommy didn't realize that it could be that simple. "The pandas, please?"

Eret smiles like Tommy made the right decision, and it fills Tommy with a distinct warmth, because he knows Eret would have smiled like that no matter *what* he chose.

"Well," Eret holds out a hand, "come on Tommy, the pandas await."

Tommy smiles shyly and takes it.

They go through the whole zoo, and Eret stops at everything that Tommy wants to see. Pandas, lemurs, rhinos, frogs – he even stops when Tommy is blinking into the foliage, spellbound.

He takes them to the cafe, where they get matching lemonades and he lets Tommy have fries instead of a salad – Tommy, grateful, only gives *half* of his food away to the clustering pigeons at their feet.

Eret also takes a lot of photos. Not just off the animals, but of Tommy too. It seems that every time Tommy turns his head to point something out to Eret, the man's phone camera is trained on him, snapping his bright, wide-eyed expression.

Tommy doesn't remember the last time his coach took a photo of him that wasn't for publicity. And he's not entirely sure, but Tommy doesn't think Eret's shaky iPhone photos of Tommy crouched by the bars of the tiger enclosure are press-worthy.

All in all, the zoo is amazing. Tommy's amazed when he genuinely feels relaxed as they're walking to the exit through the savanna. He hasn't had this much fun in forever.

"Okay," Eret says when they're about to leave. "Wait – stay here for a moment, okay? I'll be right back."

Tommy nods, expecting Eret to be stopping at the bathroom before he has to drive them both back home, but when he comes back, it's with a little green paper bag. The zoo gift shop label is on it and Tommy frowns when Eret offers it to him.

"What's this?" He asks, taking it carefully.

"For you," Eret waves him on, excited. "Go on. Look inside."

Tommy squints at his coach, then carefully opens the bag to look. Inside, laying there innocently, is a little tiger plush. Its tail curled around its fuzzy body and its paws so small and sweet, Tommy can hardly believe it's real.

"Wh—" Tommy tries, but can't get it out over the lump in his throat. "Why would you—"

"Why would I get you a gift?" Eret asks, tilting his head. Tommy squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head.

"This whole day, all of it – the zoo, the food, the rest – why are you doing this for me? You don't have to. All you have to do is coach me to the next Olympics. Why are you –"

"Caring?" Eret finishes sadly.

Tommy, tears threatening to leave him, nods. "I haven't done anything to deserve this."

"Tommy, you're already an olympic gold medalist at seventeen years old. I don't care about you getting more awards unless you want to. I'm already insanely proud of what you've done – *you* should be proud of what you've done." Eret's look shifts slightly. "And more than that, you've survived a relationship with a coach that was determined to break you. With someone who hurt you that you trusted with your heart. My number one priority is making sure that you have fun. that you're happy. *You deserve to be happy, Tommy.* You always have, gold medal or no skates at all."

Tommy doesn't cry, but it's pretty damn close. Thankfully he can take out his tiger and press his face into the fur, letting Eret wrap them both up in his arms.

The next few practices pass like this:

Tommy suggests a move, and confidently swings from a quad flip into a triple toe loop, and when Eret goes to replicate it, he tips and stumbles. When Tommy skids over, stricken, Eret's cheeks are blossoms and he's laughing, begging Tommy to help him up and *please, show me how it's done.*

Tommy asks, even though it's far too late to change anything, whether the routine is good enough, and when Eret asks why it wouldn't be, Tommy shrugs.

"I don't know," he admits, scuffing his blade through a slice in the ice, "people are gonna see it and – and they're gonna have opinions. About you and your coaching."

Eret frowns. "People will always have opinions, Tommy."

"Yes, but—" Tommy cuts himself off, frustrated. "But don't you want me to make a good impression for you? With my skating...everyone will be watching. If it isn't good enough then what will they think about you – your coaching?"

Eret actually laughs at that – not mean spirited, but just, amused. "Tommy, people at the gala don't care about me. They won't come to see *me*. Your skating is the attraction. This event is about *you*. If the choreography is good to you and makes you happy, then it's good for me."

"Oh."

"So, do you like it?"

Tommy smiles and nods. "Yeah," he says, almost giddy, "yeah, I like it. I like it a lot."

"Star Wars?" Beau asks, "again?"

Eryn glares. "I'm not afraid to hit a girl."

Beau grins sharply. "You *should* be. This girl hits *back*."

Tommy, sitting with his legs curled up to his chest on the seats, leans over and tugs at Aimsey's sleeve. "Aimsey," he says, eyes still on Eryn and Beau. "They're threatening to hurt each other."

"They do that, don't worry too much," she mumbles, not looking up from her phone. Tommy leans back, assured.

"Tom, tell her that it's not crazy to skate to the Star Wars score again."

Tommy fights to keep a straight face. "Which one?"

"Empire strikes back, duh," he huffs, almost offended. "The Imperial March, the only one worth skating to."

"Beau," Tommy says lightly, "it's not that bad. It could be Pirates of the Caribbean."

Beau tips her head and Eryn blusters *what's wrong with pirates*, but Tommy's attention is shifted to their little side-waiting room door opening. Eret pokes his head through and Tommy, weirdly, breathes easier at the mere sight of him.

"Hi everyone," he greets, "are you all ready?"

They all respond, but part for Eret to step over to Tommy, clearly sensing that's the real reason he's here. Tommy unfurls when Eret kneels in front of him.

"You ready?" He whispers. Tommy nods. Eret's expression turns knowing. "Are you nervous?"

Tommy's stomach twists. "A little," he admits hesitantly, folding his arms across his stomach. He just barely resists the urge to ask if that's alright. No matter, because the next thing that Eret says is:

"Me too." He laughs a little, giving Tommy the space to crack a smile. "Isn't that wild? I'm nervous for you but you're the one who'll be out there dancing."

"Well," Tommy says slowly, fiddling with his warm-up jacket sleeve slightly. "I think it makes sense. You're – uh – you're with me on the ice, so-" He glances up briefly, then back down, cheeks furiously red.

It's a quick enough look for Tommy to see Eret's expression- agonizingly touched and entirely too fond. "I am," Eret says. "I am out there with you. And I'll be here when you get off the ice."

Tommy beams, the nervousness fluttering in his gut fading slightly, being replaced with warmth.

From behind the closed doors, Tommy can hear muffled music begin, signaling the dimming lights. The gala is about to start. It's time. Surprisingly, he's not dreading it. He's excited. He's ready. Him and Eret have been working hard on this routine and – and Tommy's effort is *good enough*. Even before skating he knows that it will be. He knows Eret will be proud of him either way.

"You're going to do amazing," Eret says, squeezing Tommy's knee and proving his point. "Remember to have fun."

Tommy nods. "I will."

When Eret leaves, Beau frowns at him playfully. "I want Eret to give *me* encouragement before I skate."

"Me too," Aimsey pipes up. "He's so cool!"

"I could do with some Eret–encouraging," Eryn agrees.

Tommy pouts a bit, protective. "Hey," he says, "he's *my* coach." Then he blinks, surprised with himself. He smiles though, because it's true. "Eret's *my* coach." He says again, quiet, reverent, and the rest of them don't even bother pretending to want Eret anymore, too busy smiling at Tommy's joy.

Tommy steps out onto the ice, and the spotlight is out there, waiting for him, and the crowd and the eyes and [the music](#) – but he's frozen.

Something is wrong. Something's missing.

Tommy closes his eyes and listens to himself. All ten fingers and toes, steady legs, beating heart. He's eaten breakfast, slept, isn't hurt or sick or bruised. Everything is fine.

Everything except–

His eyes snap open and he spins on his heel, cutting up the ice under him. Eret, still at the gate, blinks, but Tommy doesn't stop, reaching over the barrier to frame Eret's face with his hands and pull him closer. Their foreheads tap.

"Tommy –?"

"Thank you," Tommy whispers.

Eret hesitates, then reaches up and covers Tommy's fingers with his hands. "Of course, Tommy. Of course."

Tommy waits a breath, just soaking it in, and then he pulls away, ready to skate.

The ice feels different now.

Before, it was like a shackle, like a cage. Tommy was chained there, and wouldn't be let free for anything. But now – well, now it's completely changed. Tommy doesn't quite understand it – doesn't understand how a person can come along and transform something. Make a horrible, daunting, haunted thing into something new. Into something that you're excited for. Into something freeing and fun and light.

But Eret did, and now Tommy skates like air.

He doesn't have to push himself to land every element, he doesn't have to struggle to get to the next note. He lands them all because he can, he makes it there because he wants to. It's almost as if there's an engine inside of him, purring smoothly, lifting him and dropping him and letting him speed across the ice magnificently.

The story helps – a trapped bird with clipped wings being freed, and healed, and flying again. When Tommy told Eret the story, Eret cried, and Tommy cried, and then they skated together. Eret was by his side during the practices, and he's by Tommy's side now as Tommy floats and flutters and flies.

Everything just feels different. Everything feels *good*. Tommy's tentative about it, but he thinks this is bliss. He never wants this to end. He wonders what he could have been if he would have had Eret from the very beginning. He yearns for it, but even still, he'll take this too.

He can't wait to skate for Eret for every competition, every gala, every Olympics.

When Tommy's routine is over and the crowd is cheering, Tommy smiles – a real smile – and waves, spinning around to bow. Then, he catches sight of Eret, clapping and whistling and waving, all proud joy, and Tommy can help the burst of speed he puts on to fly through the gate and into Eret's open arms.

" – and he really *teaches* me how to skate, like, really teaches," Tommy is saying, eyes practically full of stars, and hands fluttering around his words for emphasis, and Wilbur, sitting at the other end of the couch watching him, can't help but be proud. "He doesn't just make me do it over and over until I figure out where I'm going wrong – he actually just *tells* me, and Wil, I didn't know it could be so *easy*."

Wilbur sighs, a little sad, a little understanding, a little relieved. "Yeah. Yeah, It can just be easy. When you have a coach that cares about you, it all just ...opens up."

Tommy presses his hands to his cheeks. "I'm so happy all the time?"

Wilbur can't resist – he leans across the couch and pulls Tommy into his arms, shifting the little tiger plush off of his lap. Tommy hesitates, but then curls in immediately, tucking his face into Wilbur's shoulder.

"I'm happy that you're happy, sunshine." He whispers, stroking a hand through Tommy's curls. "You deserve it."

Tommy squeezes once, thankful, then pulls back. "That's what Eret said."

"Oh? That's what Eret said, huh?" Wilbur says playfully. "I bet he did. I bet he's taking all of *my* lines from me –"

"Wilbur," Tommy giggles, swatting at him when he reaches for Tommy, "Wilbur, he said it first –"

" – but I *thought* it first," Wilbur continues, only teasing, reaching and reaching, finally catching Tommy's wrists in either hand. Tommy stops shifting away, and Wilbur twines their fingers together neatly. The moment settles.

"I'm happy you have a coach that loves you."

Tommy ducks, but smiles. His words are coated with fondness and glee when he goes, "me too, Wil. Me too."

End Notes

songs I listened to as I wrote this:

safe and sound - tonight alive

hate myself - dodie

what about us - pink

and obviously, take me home - us the duo

or, the [icing those hurts playlist on Spotify](#)

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